

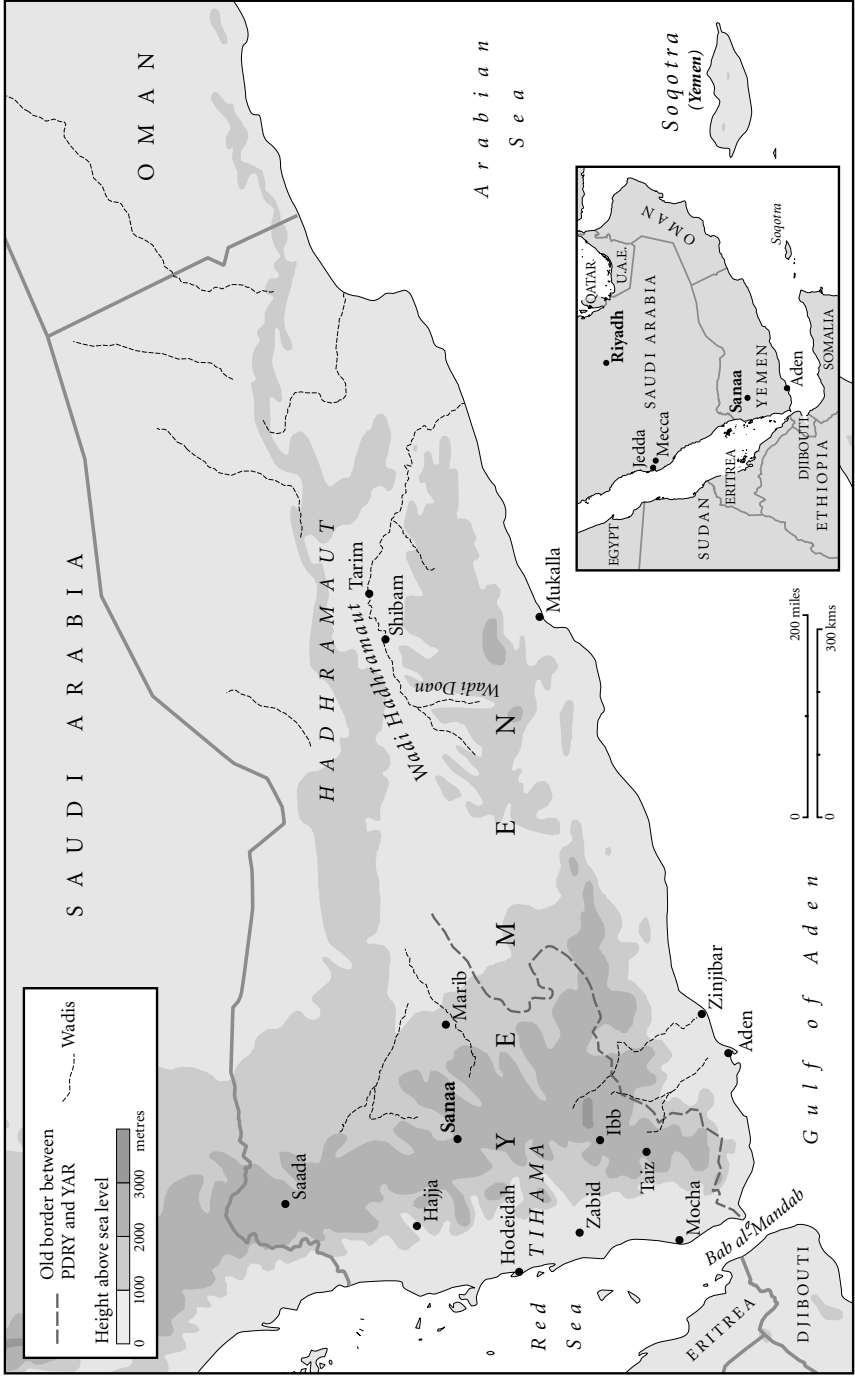
**YEMEN**

# YEMEN

DANCING ON THE HEADS OF SNAKES

VICTORIA CLARK

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# **PART ONE**

CHAPTER ONE

## UNWANTED VISITORS (1538–1918)

### THE WORLD'S COFFEE CAPITAL

Nothing is left of what was once the busiest and richest port on the Red Sea – just sand and a few crumbling facades, the abandoned homes and ‘factories’ (trading posts) that used to ‘display a very handsome appearance towards the sea’.<sup>1</sup>

No one seemed to care that these vestiges of Mocha’s heyday lie half-buried under sand and strewn with plastic refuse, or that only dogs come to this wasteland between the sprawling new town and the shore. Modern Mochans’ failure to derive any income from the fact that their town is the only Yemeni name still recognised all over the coffee-drinking world seemed surprising. No one had opened a café selling the authentic beverage. There were no postcards, or maps or guide books or key rings or T-shirts for sale. But the driver of a passing Toyota Land Cruiser hailed me in English across the sandy expanse, ‘You are welcome! Come to my house! Meet my family!’ Better one personal invitation than a thousand tourist trinkets and packets of ‘authentic’ Mocha coffee, I decided.

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On our way, bumping softly along a sandy track, my host introduced himself as a local agent for a Malaysian shipping firm. When I enquired whether any coffee still shipped out of Mocha, he told me, 'No. Ships bring in palm oil and livestock mostly, but they usually leave empty.' As a barely face-saving afterthought he added, 'Sometimes we send sweets and biscuits to Somalia.' We were headed, he told me, towards the third Mocha. The first, whose sad relics I had just been inspecting, was ruined and buried centuries ago, and replaced by a second which was suddenly drowned by a tsunami 'about ninety years ago'. The third had a flimsy, provisional look about it; there were plenty of the rickety Japanese motorbikes doing duty as taxis, and the usual late morning hubbub around the qat shop.

A low door in a blank expanse of high white-washed wall opened off the sandy lane we had stopped in, straight onto a large, shady courtyard that was wet from a recent hosing down. In the main room of the house, sparsely furnished in the usual comfortable Arab way, with floor-level cushions and arm rests along all the walls and a television tuned to an Egyptian soap opera, I met my host's daughter. Although advantageously married to an army officer in the capital, Sanaa, she was adamant she preferred to be here at home, in this decayed and steamy backwater, among people her father described to me as peaceful and calm – 'as quiet as fish'. Implied by his simile was the usual distrust of the northern interior of the country, where Sanaa and Yemen's northern highlands are located.

In theory, Yemenis have stood a better chance of success at forging themselves into a modern nation state than either Pakistanis or Afghans, or dozens of African peoples. They are proud of the fact that they have been regarded as a single, distinct people since at least the seventh-century era of the Prophet. Noting that his missionaries were getting a particularly warm reception at the southernmost end of the Arabian Peninsula, Mohammed reportedly declared that Yemenis 'have the kindest and gentlest hearts of all. Faith is Yemeni, wisdom is Yemeni.'

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These days, however, Yemenis' pronounced sense of regional identity easily trumps their consciousness of belonging to a modern nation state. Accent and dress, let alone different histories, vastly varying geography and inequalities of life opportunities, all act as powerfully polarising forces which only the ubiquity of qat and the country's swiftly growing network of roads have even begun to counteract. Few inhabitants of Tihama, where the pace and way of life closely resembles that of East Africans on the opposite side of the Red Sea, would think of wearing the traditional northern highland tribesman's curved dagger, the *jambiyah*, let alone a gun. Half East African himself, my host was relaxed in a *futa*, suitably loose attire in the sweltering climate that prevails in Tihama as well as in Aden and Hadhramaut and Mahra to the east, but is much less seen in the highlands. Instead of offering me coffee or tea, the kind shipping agent showcased his coast dweller's hospitality, his tolerance of strangers and their infidel ways, by serving me a can of black-market lager.

The impetus to unite all Yemenis into a single polity has usually been stronger in the country's tribal northern highlands than on the coast, let alone in Hadhramaut, the high, baking plateau deeply etched with fertile *wadis* (canyons) to the east, for the simple reason that the northern tribes have always lacked the wherewithal – either in the form of arable land or other natural resources – to survive in their lofty fastnesses without exploiting the coast and the verdant southern highlands. But those same rapacious northern highlanders have also acted as the sole defenders of Yemen's freedom from foreign domination through the centuries.

## THIEVING OTTOMANS AND FRANKS

Five hundred years ago, when the Ottoman Turks sailed into the Red Sea to secure the precious Muslim Holy Places of Mecca and Medina and see off the Portuguese 'Frankish' threat, the Tihamans welcomed them in much the same open-hearted manner as my kind host had welcomed me.

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Unlike the Zaydi Shiite\* northern highlanders who make up perhaps a quarter of Yemen's population today, Tihamans are Shafai Sunnis. Weary of exploitation by those hungry northern tribes led by a Zaydi Shiite priestly caste of descendants of the Prophet Mohammed, rulers known as imams, it was only to be expected that Tihamans would welcome Sunni Ottoman influence. But the Ottomans – intent on uniting the entire Muslim *umma*, Sunni and Shiite, under their caliphate – were not content with going where they were wanted. Penetrating inland towards those northern highlands, they soon encountered Zaydi resistance. Imam Sharaf al-Din and his tribes may have been too weak at the time to expel the Turks from Aden and the coastal regions, but he would not surrender his southern highland stronghold of Taiz, barely an hour's drive inland from Mocha today, let alone his northern highland capital of Sanaa.

Nevertheless, during that first decade of Ottoman presence in Yemen, the 1540s, it looked as if the Turks would be able to complete their conquest. Not until 1547 was their progress halted by Imam Sharif al-Din's son Mutahhar who, having retreated to Thula – a rocky highland fastness to the north of Sanaa – managed to withstand a forty-day siege there. At last accepting there was no dislodging him, the Turks acknowledged his dominion over swathes of the northern highlands and a gentlemanly truce was agreed when Mutahhar pledged a nominal obedience to the Ottoman Sultan. He could congratulate himself on having achieved what all future imams and the Zaydi highlanders would achieve up to and even beyond the formal abolition of the imamate four centuries later: the exclusion of any foreign invader – whether Muslim or infidel – from most of their northern highlands. He was to accomplish a great deal more than that over the

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\* After the death of the fourth Shia Imam, Ali Zain al-Abidin, a minority in northern Iran recognised his younger son Zayd as Imam rather than his eldest son. Doctrinally, Zaydism is as close to Sunnism as possible. Yemen is the only centre of Zaydism today, but between the ninth and twelfth centuries there was another Zaydi state located south of the Caspian Sea.



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next twenty years, largely thanks to the Ottomans' waning interest in their distant and irritatingly inhospitable acquisition.

Increasingly preoccupied with the conquest of central Europe and especially Vienna, the Ottomans allowed South Arabia to slip down their list of priorities. With its ferociously hostile northern tribes and equally repellent terrain – craggily mountainous and cold inland, oppressively hot on the coast – the region had nothing whatsoever to recommend it except its strategic position at the lower opening to the Red Sea and its proximity to Islam's Holy Places. The Sublime Porte would maintain a military presence there and collect as many taxes as possible rather than attempt to establish a full-scale occupation. Despite having subjugated much more than Tihama and Aden and all the southern highlands, the Ottomans were soon gladly delegating the tax farming and administration to local sheikhs. Naturally, for those sheikhs to agree to collect taxes to enrich the Sultan 'it was necessary', as a French historian puts it, 'to constantly shower them with gifts'.<sup>2</sup> The sheikhs commanded a higher and higher price for their loyalty, which meant there was less and less profit to be made by a succession of pashas who bemoaned their miserable lot and pined for plum postings in places where the living was easier and the pickings far richer – Cairo, Damascus or Basra. They vented their spleen and frustrated ambition in savage over-taxation of the natives. Swathes of fertile land in the southern highlands were deserted by peasants fleeing taxes too punitive to pay. In this way, portions of the population who, like the Tihamans, had at first been amenable to Ottoman rule, were needlessly alienated.

A desperately greedy Mahmud Pasha meddled with the mint, devaluing the coinage by tampering with its gold content and pocketing the spare gold himself. Soon noticing that their local currency salaries were not buying them nearly as much as those of their peers in Anatolia or Egypt, Ottoman soldiers fell to making up the shortfall by extortion from the locals. When that resource ran dry they began flogging off their personal possessions and even their weapons. Mahmud Pasha bled

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Yemen as dry as he could for seven years before bribing his way into a posting to Cairo. His departure in February 1565 was a memorable enough affair to have warranted recording; his entourage comprised a personal guard of a hundred slaves and his luggage included a throne and many chests of treasure. A side effect of an Ottoman decision to divide the province of Yemen in two after his complaint that its extent and terrain made communications too slow, was that his successor's opportunities for personal gain were dramatically restricted. The fiefdom of Ridvan Pasha who took charge of the north-western half of the province – in effect the fortified towns of Sanaa and Saada – was not half as rich a prize as the peacefully prospering Tihama with its Red Sea ports, and the central southern highlands where a promising export commodity, coffee, was starting to thrive.

Dissatisfied, Ridvan Pasha lost no time in trying to improve his situation. Insisting on a renegotiation of the thirteen-year-old truce with Mutahhar al-Din, he sent a tactlessly high-handed *qadhi*\* to open talks, with predictably damaging results. Deciding that he was no longer bound by the truce, Mutahhar began to foment fresh trouble for the Turks and Ridvan Pasha's determination to extend taxation to Mutahhar's northern highlands gave him the perfect *casus belli*. He fired the first shot, at a Turkish tax collector. What followed was the steady reconquest of the country by and for Mutahhar's Zaydi highlander tribesmen, beginning with the capture of the fortress at Saada, the only stronghold north of Sanaa that the Ottomans controlled. By January 1567 all the northern highlands except for Sanaa and Amran were under his control, with Ridvan Pasha suing for peace before being recalled to Constantinople to be punished for his incompetence with three years in jail. While besieging Sanaa, Mutahhar ensured that the southern and western routes to the capital were closed to prevent any Turkish reinforcements under the pasha of the south, Murad the One-Eyed, coming to Sanaa's aid.

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\* Muslim judge.

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When Murad the One-Eyed did belatedly stir himself to relieve Sanaa, Mutahhar was ready for him. In June, in a narrow defile, Muttahar's Zaydi fighters managed to ambush a hundred Ottoman horsemen and slaughter every one of them. Playing on mounting popular hatred of the Turks, Mutahhar then called for a general uprising against Ottoman domination, whipping up righteous outrage at the Turks' lax standards of Muslim observance: 'So where is the fury? Where has the passion gone? While these men [the Turks] degrade women of high status, taking them off to evil haunts where they can take their pleasure . . . you eat, drink, dance and play music.'<sup>3</sup>

Soon even the Sunni southern highlands and coastal regions were heeding the Zaydi call to rise and throw off the Ottoman yoke. After guaranteeing its Turkish garrison's safe passage back to Taiz, the southern highland town of Jiblah took a gleeful revenge by slaughtering every Ottoman soldier as soon as they left their fortress. Abandoning Sanaa to its fate, desperate to return to the southern highland town of Taiz where the Ottoman treasury was kept, Murad the One-Eyed risked relying on a local tribesman to guide him back south. Immediately, he was double-crossed. In a narrow mountain pass, his cavalcade was bombarded by boulders hurled by tribesmen infesting the mountains. In a valley transformed into a mud bath after tribesmen had flooded it by diverting a stream, his soldiers blundered about helplessly, sitting ducks for the enemy above them.

Sanaa fell to Mutahhar in the summer of 1567 and the new pasha who arrived to take up his post in the south was appalled to discover how little land there was left for him to squeeze for taxes. Encircled by hostile tribes, Taiz and its treasury was perilously isolated and nearby Zabid overrun with Turks who had fled there from every other part of the province. No wiser than any of his predecessors, the newcomer delegated the job of raising more taxes to an unscrupulous *qadhi* from Mocha. By October 1567 he had lost Taiz and his treasury. To the south in Aden a tiny 200-strong Turkish garrison surrendered without a fight, its Ottoman governor fleeing by sea.

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Only then did alarm bells start clanging at the Porte. In the words of one contemporary Turkish writer, it was only the loss of one of the world's finest natural harbours that finally awakened a terror in the Ottomans. They feared 'the cursed Franks' would seize Aden. They knew that the Europeans' superior 'knowledge of artillery and cannon fire and their care for ports and castles'<sup>4</sup> would make it hard to recapture again and they trembled at the prospect of losing their Holy Places. Only a massive task force, mustered in Egypt, could save the situation, they believed, but, despite an Ottoman chronicler's proud boast that every Egyptian, 'save the useless, such as a very old sheikh, or child, or the like'<sup>5</sup> rushed to sign up for the Yemen campaign, inefficiency and power struggles delayed its departure for nine months. Not until December 1558 did a fresh pasha cross the Red Sea with an army of 3,000 to start the reconquest, and it was not until spring the following year that the Ottomans turned the tide in their favour with the overland arrival of the then Ottoman ruler of Egypt, Sinan Pasha, at the head of a main force that rejoiced in 4,000 horses, 10,000 camels, 'great pavilions, pedigree horses dressed in gold with bridles of gold and silver, weapons, armour and helmets', to say nothing of the heavy guns and supplies sent by sea.

Naturally biased in favour of the Ottomans, the main Turkish chronicler of the reconquest refers to Imam Mutahhar's forces as heretic Zaydis and takes cheap shots at the lame Imam himself by referring to him as a 'cripple' and emphasising his pathetic inability to ride anything but a donkey. But there is much that rings thrillingly true and vivid in his description of the miseries the Turks faced in recapturing Yemen. The appalling harshness of so much of the highlands struck the chronicler again and again: 'there was nothing human or friendly there: the land was lost only to gazelle and camels the colour of the desert: behind every rock lurked a pack of monkeys or a pride of lions . . . nothing but the howling of jackals, the hooting of owls and the sound of crows.'<sup>6</sup> Oxen could pull their heavy gun carriages on flat land, but only manpower could heave them over mountain passes too

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steep and narrow for wheeled transport. The author complains of a *wadi* that ‘curves like a snake and anyone who takes it would risk being poisoned by the string of vipers coiled in its dangerous crannies’, where ‘horses would wade up to the belly and stirrup’. He describes a place whose mountains ‘pierce the clouds, a place where there was only pain’.<sup>7</sup> He also details an engagement in which Zaydi tribesmen ‘of extreme coarseness’<sup>8</sup> were occupying a mountain top, ‘spreading out behind the rocks like cockroaches and beetles’ and rolling giant boulders down onto the Turks, who responded with great blasts from their cannons, ‘throwing up sparks like castles’.<sup>9</sup>

The Zaydi tribes were no match for the Ottomans’ determined assault with their new-fangled artillery. Imam Mutahhar, who had fled to Kawkaban, another rocky mountain-top fastness not far from Sanaa, was forced to descend to parley with Sinan Pasha, an occasion apparently ominously marred by his donkey transport breaking wind on departure. Sinan Pasha graciously granted Mutahhar the governorship of the area around Saada, but the Ottomans were back in charge by 1571, reunited in a single *vilayet* under his firm rule. Imam Mutahhar’s death the following year spelt the end of his dynasty. Rival families disputed the succession until, in the closing years of the sixteenth century, a new dynasty of imams emerged, the al-Qasim, to trouble the Turks again. Yet another 8,000-strong force of Egyptians was mustered, but only with great difficulty. Many soldiers had to be forced on board ship at Cairo and the army was soon decimated by casualties, desertion and disease.

This third and final effort to secure Yemen for the Ottoman caliphate lacked conviction. The Porte was losing interest in holding Yemen. With the golden prize of Vienna still untaken, the *vilayet* of Yemen was judged just too costly in manpower and materiel to be bothering with any longer. With Portuguese power in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean waning, the Turks’ terror of Franks capturing the Muslim holy places was also fading, especially as they were on better terms with the latest Frankish powers to take an interest in the region – the British and

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the Dutch – than they had ever been with the Portuguese. Mocha, their last toehold, was growing rich by its coffee trade and already home to both the British and Dutch East India companies' trading posts by 1636, when the last Ottoman governor of the port acknowledged the obvious, gathered up his tiny remaining garrison, and boarded a ship for Egypt.

Yemenis were slow to realise it, but the British and Dutch vessels crowding into Mocha to buy coffee in the early seventeenth century represented a far greater long-term threat to their prosperity and independence than any Ottoman army intent on subjugating their precious highlands. English East India Company merchants had first put in to Ottoman Mocha in January 1609, twenty-three years before the Turks abandoned Yemen. In spite of finding it 'unreasonable hot', a merchant named John Jourdain had judged the port 'a very plesaunt place to bide in, were it not for the Turkes' tyrannie'.<sup>10</sup> He had soon been disappointed to discover that he would need special permission from the Sultan in Constantinople if he wanted to set up a 'factory' (trading post) there and begin buying a commodity he called 'coho'.\* Coffee's special stimulating effects were a secret known only to the Muslim world at the time, so the plant intrigued Jourdain. On his trek inland into the mountains to Sanaa to parley with the pasha, he had noticed how jealously the Yemenis guarded their lucrative export, wrapping it in mystery and wonder – 'it is reported this seede will growe at noe other place but neere this mountaine',<sup>11</sup> he wrote.

Ever interested in turning a profit from their troublesome southernmost province, the Ottomans had been encouraging coffee production and, with it, Mocha's prominence. The southern highlands behind the Red Sea coastal plain, through which Jourdain must have passed en route for Sanaa, had experienced the equivalent of a Gold Rush. Its mountainsides had been transformed by an intricate lacework of terraces designed to take maximum advantage of the flash flood monsoon rains. A French visitor noted admiringly that 'the greatest

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\* The Arabic for coffee is *qahwa*.

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piece of husbandry that belongs to them [Yemenis], consists in turning the course of Rivulets and Springs, that descend from the Mountains into their Nurseries, conveying the Water by little Canals to the Foot of the Trees'.<sup>12</sup> Those patterned mountainsides where a little coffee but more qat is grown these days remain one of the most beautiful and impressively workmanlike features of western Yemen, a startling testament to the people's ingenuity and fortitude.

Back in the early seventeenth century, detachments of Ottoman soldiers guarded the precious coffee plantations and anyone apprehended in the act of trying to smuggle coffee seedlings out of the country was heavily fined. It was a disincentive that failed to deter the first Dutch visitor to Mocha, a merchant named Pieter van der Broeck, from removing a few to the Dutch Republic in 1616 and planting them in a greenhouse. That theft enabled a group of Amsterdam grandees to present the king of France with a single coffee sapling, a curiosity for his own Paris greenhouse. Yemenis were about to learn that if the Muslim Turks had come to their country to fight and steal, the Christian Franks who had come to trade and steal were not so different.

In 1618, the Porte had granted permission to both the English and Dutch to establish their 'factories' in Mocha. By the middle of the century, with the Turks gone, the port's coffee trade with Europe was expanding fast and Yemen thriving. By the century's end Mocha was reportedly exporting some ten million kilos of coffee a year.<sup>13</sup> However, the effect of that first Dutch theft was about to be sorely felt. Yemenis were soon to lose their world coffee monopoly. In European colonies in south-east Asia, and South America and Africa, the precious plant could now be grown more cheaply thanks to colonised slave labour. The growing failure to compete would lead not only to the decay of Mocha and the southern highlands, but also to the impoverishment of the northern highlands that had so richly benefited from the trade since the Turks' departure.

But Mocha has furnished Yemenis with some small consolation for their loss in the form of another plant – qat (*catha edulis*). A Koranically

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permitted stimulant derived from chewing the evergreen qat shrub's tenderest top leaves for up to six hours a day, qat has long been as emblematic of Yemeni culture as the wearing of the *jambiyah* or the *futa*. Yemenis believe the life-enhancing properties of both coffee and qat were discovered at precisely the same time by a fourteenth-century Sufi named Ali Ibn Umar al-Shadhili who, while residing as a hermit in the vicinity of Mocha for twenty years, nourished himself and his meditations on both substances. There was a time, probably as far back as the sixteenth century, when coffee and qat vied for pole position in Yemenis' hearts, a state of affairs reflected in this imagined debate between the two substances:

Qat says: they take off your husk and crush you. They force you in the fire and pound you. I seek refuge in God from people created by fire.

Coffee says: A prize can be hidden in ritual. The diamond comes clear after the fire. And fire doesn't alter gold. The people throw most of you away and step on you. And the bits they eat, they spit out. And the spittoon is emptied down the toilet.

Qat scoffs: You say I come out of the mouth into a spittoon. It is a better place than the one you will come out of!<sup>14</sup>

Qat has the last ribald word here, but its high standing did not stop Imam Mutahhar's father, the great Sharaf al-Din, issuing a fatwa against it in 1543, commanding that all qat trees in his domains be immediately uprooted and burnt. He had taken fright at the reported ill-effects of the plant after discovering some of his closest entourage stumbling around his palace, slurring their words, claiming that *halal* [permitted by the Koran] qat, rather than *haram* [forbidden by the Koran] wine, was to blame. The chronicler of this tale piously protests the Imam's harsh outlawing of his people's main solace, noting that 'God, realising that qat was utterly blameless, allowed some qat shoots to survive under the earth until the downfall of this dynasty, when



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they shot forth again, by means of his Grace. He the Creator par excellence!<sup>15</sup>

Qat has had the whip hand over coffee ever since in Yemen, but it was never and will never be the enriching export commodity that coffee once was. Its defenders will point out that it is neither as mind altering nor as harmful to the health as alcohol, and forcefully argue that if not for its nation-wide popularity, if not for the fact that one in every seven Yemenis is involved in the cultivation, distribution and sale of qat, much of rural Yemen would be deserted. Its more numerous detractors will contest that it is both disgraceful and dangerous for Yemenis to be growing so much qat, that it represents a ruinous waste of money and time and, most importantly, water. There are those, however, who quietly reason that, if not for the passive consolations of qat, many more young Yemeni males than is presently the case would be eagerly resorting to the more active consolations of jihad.

### ZAYDI HOME RULE

On an expedition out of Sanaa to Mutahhar's northern highland fastnesses of Thula and Kawkaban, I stood on a lofty rocky promontory scanning the wide view over a bare plateau, here and there sparsely dotted with neat rows of qat trees and the odd fortress of a local administration building. Behind me, the village of Kawkaban was almost deserted and strewn with rubble. It was easy to imagine how the Turks had first failed and then lost interest in conquering such places, but it was even easier to identify the most crucially enduring fact about Yemen's political geography. In order to survive in their harshly inhospitable refuge, the northern highland tribes have had little choice but to turn their only asset, the threat or promise of their organised fighting potential, to their material advantage.

The attitude of defensive desolation I was sensing in Thula and Kawkaban had first struck me on a visit to another part of those highlands, the land of the Beni Shaddad, a clan belonging to the powerful

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Khawlan federation, an area barely an hour's drive east of Sanaa. Along fifteen kilometres of unmade-up track only navigable by four-wheel drive, my Khawlani tribesman friend drove, climbing higher and higher, around rocky crags, past the range of seven high peaks on which beacons used to be lit as a signal for the clans to gather in preparation for war, past village after tiny village in which many of the mud brick multi-storey homes were collapsing into ruins or still bore the scars of 1960s civil strife, in which there was no sign of any economic activity whatsoever, not even a small qat plantation. At last we arrived at his home village, a loose cluster of mud brick or stone dwellings, some disintegrating, some already reduced to a pile of dust, and a small vineyard. A crowd of children gathered to welcome us, but there was no sign of any other life or activity. I learned that the village had neither electricity nor enough water to extend the vineyard into a commercial venture, that my friend's brother-in-law counted himself lucky to be working at transporting lorry-loads of stone to Sanaa for the building trade, and that I was the first foreigner to visit the place for more than thirty years.

People in such remote areas have always distrusted any intruders, preferring to remain, as in Imam Muttahar's day, a tribal law unto themselves. If, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the sweeteners paid to tribal sheikhs by the Turks had to be more and more generous to secure the tribes' loyalty, after the Turks departed a home-grown imam in Sanaa – his position was secured by the customs dues paid by foreign coffee merchants – continued to buy the support of those sheikhs by paying them regular stipends and rewarding them with gifts of fertile land outside their unproductive highlands. The majority of the most powerful Zaydi northern tribal dynasties today established themselves during the relatively stable period of northern Zaydi home rule that followed the Turks' departure.

The role of the Zaydi highland tribes in Yemen's failure to thrive as a modern nation state, complete with functioning and respected institutions, is easier to understand once the character of the Zaydi

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imamate is understood. First, a Zaydi imam could only derive from one of an aristocracy of *sayyid* families whose entitlement to special treatment – having their hands kissed and meriting the protection of tribesmen, for example – was based on their claim to be directly descended from the Prophet himself via his daughter and son-in-law. Lacking a divine right or a popular mandate to rule, an imam was more referee than ruler and entirely reliant on the armed support of the tribes for his maintenance in power. He lived in the knowledge that he was only imam for as long as his conduct and demeanour were deemed worthy of his office. The highland Zaydi tribes would not shrink from withdrawing their support since the violent overthrow of an unjust ruler was a specifically Zaydi religious duty. If those mercenary tribesmen could be kept in line with carrots and sticks – with gifts, but also frequent resort to taking a member of a troublesome sheikh's family hostage – an imam also had to be expert at dividing and ruling, at watching for rivals and plotting in an atmosphere of permanent and chronic insecurity and suspicion. Like 'dancing on the heads of snakes', ruling Yemenis called for a light and nimble touch, and an acute apprehension of danger.

An octogenarian early eighteenth-century imam whom the French coffee-merchant Jean de La Roque encountered in 1709 – a relatively prosperous era when, as he put it, it was 'easy to see that the consumption of coffee was never so great as it is at present'<sup>16</sup> – was particularly anxious to know how France was governed. The news that Louis XIV ruled in reasonable safety and by divine right must have awakened his envy as well as his interest. After accepting a gift of a mirror, Imam al-Mahdi Muhammad 'look'd himself several Times in it, as did all the Grandees of his Court' while quizzing the Frenchman long and hard about 'the Qualifications and Personal Vertues'<sup>17</sup> of his sovereign. In return for a generous gift of coffee, an alliance, and permission for a French trading post with preferential customs duties to be opened in Mocha, he requested a short history of France, a picture of the Sun King's most magnificent palace and a portrait of him with his family.

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The modest appearance and lifestyle of that early Qasim imam impressed de La Roque. ‘Going with his legs and feet bare and wearing slippers after the Turkish fashion’, he was at least as much religious leader – ‘Priest or Pontiff of the Law of Muhammad’ – as king. The Frenchman described the main event of his week, Friday worship, which revealed him to be at least as much a military as a religious leader. Accompanied by a thousand foot-soldiers, two hundred members of his personal guard, camels and horses adorned with black ostrich feathers and a small army of drummers, with a son on either side of him, the Imam rode a white horse towards the large tent that served as his mosque. One of his cavalry officers held a vast green damask umbrella, with an eight-inch-long red and gold fringe and a ‘globe of silver gilt’ on top, over his head while in front of him another cavalry officer carried a Koran in a red cloth bag and behind him another carried his sabre, symbolising the distinctively Zaydi twinning of Islam with the pious duty of rebelling against an unrighteous imam. Emerging from the tent an hour later, the man the Zaydis revered as the rightful caliph of the entire Muslim *umma* was greeted by volleys of celebratory gunfire. Finally, a display of stylised skirmishing awaited him back in his palace courtyard.

Enriched and therefore empowered by the proceeds of the coffee trade, those early Qasim imams succeeded in extending their rule over what might now be called ‘Greater Yemen’. Along with Aden in the south, they took Hadhramaut in the east and Dhofar, now a part of Oman, as well as Asir and Najran in the north-west, which are two southern provinces of Saudi Arabia today. There was a price to be paid for this success, however. Military campaigning coupled with the ceaseless game of dividing and ruling the tribes while showering them with gifts were always more pressing priorities than living up to the claim to be an ideally just Muslim ruler. When the mid-eighteenth-century Danish scientist explorer Carsten Niebuhr was travelling around Yemen, astonishing every Yemeni he met with his new-fangled microscope and cures for impotence, the imam of the day had a rotten reputation for ‘perfidious cruelty’.

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Niebuhr took the trouble to record a story that highlighted ‘several particulars illustrative of the principles of the imam’s government’. A good, loyal sheikh named Abd Urrab had speedily obeyed when told by Imam al-Mahdi ‘to demolish the castles of some neighbouring lords’, but his zealous obedience backfired on him. One of those targeted ‘lords’ took his revenge by convincing the Imam that Abd Urrab was getting above himself, plotting to raise a rebellion and depose him. The credulous, possibly paranoid, Imam sent an army of 3,000 to besiege Abd Urrab in his fortress for eleven months, but without success. When the abused Abd Urrab finally did turn against the Imam and succeed in capturing Taiz, the Imam had no choice but to acknowledge the conquest and offer an alliance. The agreement was duly sealed – ‘confirmed with seven oaths’. Two sheikhs stood as its guarantors. The too trusting Abd Urrab then accepted a courteous invitation to visit the Imam in Sanaa. On arrival he was ‘seized, bedaubed on the face and hands with red paint . . . placed on a camel with his face to the tail, and conducted through the streets’ while his distraught sister ‘sprang from the roof of a house and fell, dead at his feet’. But even this tragic gesture could not spare her brother the ignominy of being hurled onto a dung hill and beheaded. The two guarantor sheikhs did not hesitate to express their outrage. One, whom Niebuhr identifies as the head of the Hashid and Bakil tribal ‘mercenaries’, was instantly thrown into prison and beheaded, while the other was invited to a meeting with the Imam and swiftly despatched by a cup of poisoned coffee. ‘Since that time’, notes Niebuhr, the Imam had been constantly troubled by tribesmen encroaching on his dominions and burning ‘several cities’.<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr guessed he would soon be deposed and/or murdered.

Yemen’s best-known tribal federations today – the Hashid (east and north of Sanaa) and Bakil (west and north of Sanaa) – come out of this story well, as proud upholders of truth and honour. The Imam, meanwhile, is revealed as a ruthlessly vengeful villain, as a brazen flouter of tribal law, as illegitimate a ruler as any Ottoman Turk had ever been.

## YEMEN

Generally, the eighteenth-century imams were not as competent as their predecessors, and the less competent they were, the more land they forfeited. Having lost Hadhramaut and Dhofar by 1680, they were forced out of Aden by the southern Abdali tribe in 1727. They also flouted another important qualification of their rule by copying European monarchs, starting to hand their office straight on to their sons between 1716 and 1836. A son became imam apparent as soon as he was appointed governor of Sanaa and he, along with all his brothers, gained the title *al-Sayf al-Islam* [the Sword of Islam].

The gap between the ideally qualified imam and the reality was widening all the time. 'He was more like a king than a caliph,' wrote one Yemeni chronicler about the imam who succeeded the one de La Roque had met. Although sufficiently modest never to wear silk, this imam only pretended to be learned, 'He inclined to the scholars, talking with them and imitating them . . . So the scholars in his court would help in this [pretence], both out of desire and fear.'<sup>19</sup> Al-Mansur Ali, imam from 1775 until 1809, was neither a brave military leader nor a just ruler; 'his habit was to seclude himself and to cavort with free and slave women', in a palace filled with 'gold and silver and all kinds of clothes, precious stones . . . weaponry, medical implements and vials, and trunks full of musk, amber and clocks'.<sup>20</sup> In 1823 he invited Robert Finlay, a doctor attached to the British trading post in Mocha, up to Sanaa to cure him and his family of various ailments. After presenting the Imam with gifts that included a 'double-barrelled percussion gun', Finlay treated him for a fever in a room stuffed full of horse tack, bales of cloth, weapons and no fewer than six ticking gold and silver watches. Unimpressed, Finlay reported back to London that there was 'nothing dignified or commanding in the Imam's countenance; he is extremely passionate and constantly changing and disgracing in the most shameful manner, by putting in prisons and in irons, his principal servants and favourites, then restoring them again to their former rank'. Fearful of *sayyid* rivals, his current closest favourites were 'a former watch mender and a tailor from the bazaar'.<sup>21</sup>

## UNWANTED VISITORS (1538–1918)

Finlay formed no better opinion of the highland tribes, dismissing them as ‘an idle uncivilised race, constantly quarrelling with each other and committing robbery’. Their sheikhs, many of them bribed by the Imam not to ‘plunder his subjects’, inspired no respect in him because they looked ‘just like their men, simple in blue cotton, all of them chewing kaat [qat], drinking kishr [a tea made from the husks of coffee beans]’.<sup>22</sup> He mentioned what the Ottomans had long ago discovered to their cost and what remains broadly true today, that the most independent sheikhs were ‘those who inhabit the highest and most precipitous mountains’.<sup>23</sup>

Such an unfavourable report might have convinced Lord Palmerston that the southernmost tip of the Arabian Peninsula could safely be ignored, but Britain’s mounting rivalry with France had compelled him to take an interest in the region.

### A FIRST JEWEL FOR QUEEN VICTORIA’S CROWN

With the French threat to India seen off, Britain was only looking for one thing at the far end of the Arabian Peninsula by the early 1800s – somewhere her speedy new steam ships could refuel on the long journey from Suez to Bombay, a coaling station.

A first plan to requisition the island of Soqatra, closer to Somalia on the Horn of Africa than to Yemen but always a Yemeni possession and now a valuable eco-reserve, had to be aborted in 1834 when its ancient blind ruler, most of whose territory was situated in the easternmost Mahra province of today’s Yemen, told the British naval officer charged with the task of acquiring it that he refused to sell so much as the distance between his thumb and his little finger. The island, he explained to Captain Stafford Bettesworth Haines of Britain’s Indian Navy, was ‘the gift of the Almighty to the Mahras’.<sup>24</sup> A subsequent attempt to seize it failed, when much of the expeditionary force died of malarial fever.

The following year Captain Haines turned his attention to Aden, hoping for better luck. The situation was becoming urgent. Doing